

Landon Stevenson is the owner of Twila Mae's Chicken Salad.

Popular SW Florida farmers market vendor opens new Fort Myers restaurant

Robyn George
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At first, Twila Mae just chuckled at the idea.

About seven years ago, her grandson Landon Stevenson was thinking about starting a chicken salad business, selling it at local farmers markets.

"She thought it was such a simple food," Stevenson said. "She didn't think it would resonate with people. But now she's super proud."

And she should be.

Stevenson not only found success at farmers markets throughout Southwest Florida, but he also opened his first brick-and-mortar on Oct. 23.

"What started as a little family business became

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Signature sandwiches are served on croissants at Twila Mae's Chicken Salad in Fort Myers.
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Twila Mae's

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something much bigger," he said during the debut of his quick-service restaurant along South Tamiami Trail in Fort Myers.

It's in the same San Carlos Park plaza that houses Spice Club Indian Grill, right behind the McDonald's.

And did we mention Stevenson named it Twila Mae's Chicken Salad in honor of his grandma?

"She's 89 and lives in Missouri," he said. "She'll come here in January or February."

Twila Mae's story begins at local farmers markets

What she'll find is a business that's come a long way since 2020.

"Our first farmers market was in Bonita Springs," Stevenson said. "It was just my wife (Katie) and I. We started in the middle of COVID. It was rough. Everyone had masks on, and no one was taking samples. We did like $76 the first day."

And now?

"We do more," Stevenson said with a grin. "We now do 19 farmers markets a week. We have 15 right now. The few left will open in November."

And six days a week in season, they're everywhere — from Captiva Island on Tuesdays and Marco Island on Wednesdays (which is Stevenson's busiest stop) to the Saturday Morning Market in St. Petersburg, along with 10 others on the weekends.

"We'll keep doing all our farmers markets," said Stevenson, who will personally be at the restaurant during the week and the downtown Fort Myers farmers market on Saturdays. "We outgrew our old space (which was a commercial kitchen). So we got this (new restaurant) to produce more."

He signed on that new space in February. And while it did have a kitchen — Clean Eatz was there before — "It was not what we needed."

"We put a lot into the buildout," Stevenson said. "We repainted, put in different lighting fixtures. All the hardwood on the walls is new. New seating."

Family photos — including one of Landon and Katie on their first date back in high school — give the dining room a homey feel. It seats 28 inside, and another 24 spots are waiting to be added on the outside patio.

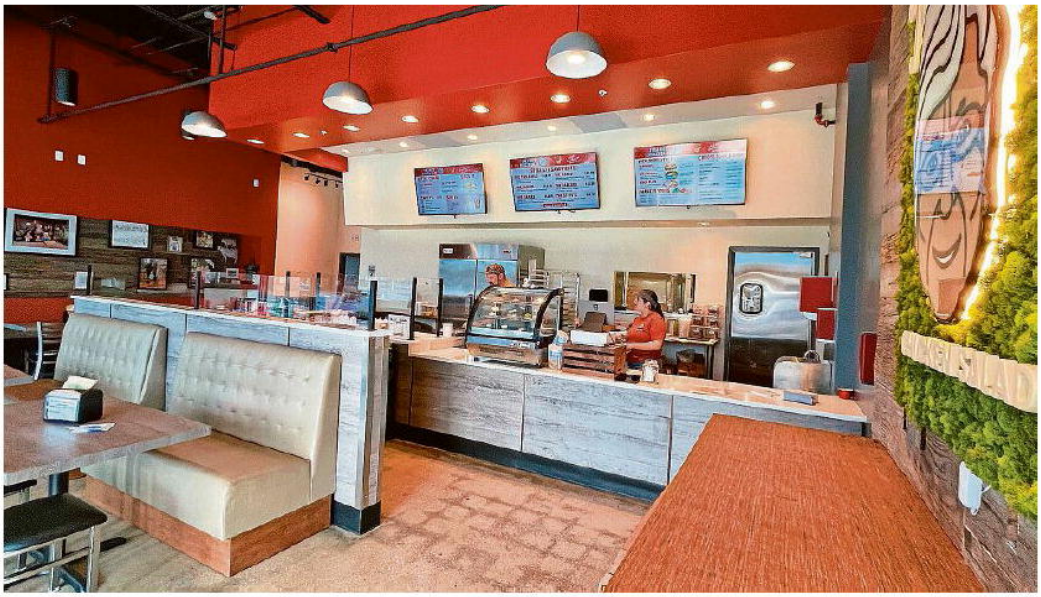
Orders are placed at the counter and either handed to you then or soon brought out to you.

While grab-and-go by-the-pound containers are the norm at farmers markets, Twila Mae's offers much more.

"Think of Chipotle, but for chicken salad," Stevenson said. "Pick your bread, flavor (of chicken salad), sauces (or dressing), all the toppings."

Speaking of that Twila Mae's chicken salad ....

"The base (recipe) we use is my grandmother's," Stevenson said. "Chicken, mayo, celery, lemon juice, some spices."



Twila Mae's Chicken Salad is a new fast casual restaurant in San Carlos Park.

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Landon Stevenson, the owner of Twila Mae's Chicken Salad in Fort Myers, prepares an order during opening day at his restaurant.

Seven variations, plus a rotating seasonal flavor, are created from that classic and savory base.

Think traditional cranberry, Buffalo, bacon ranch, lemon pesto, Thai peanut and more.

"My favorite is the pineapple jalapeño," Stevenson said. "It's a nice blend of sweet and spicy."

For $12.99, you can get your chicken salad of choice in a sandwich (on a pretzel, seeded or butter croissant), as a garden bowl (with greens, veggies, cheese and toppings and dressing of your choice) or a scoop plate (with crackers).

Specialty sandwiches are also offered for $12.99, like the Twila Mae with cranberry, lettuce, tomato and onion on a pretzel croissant.

"That's the best-seller at the Fort Myers market, so we named it after her," Stevenson said. "We named them all after the best-sellers in each town."

The Sanibel has Just Chicken (salad), arugula and house vinaigrette on that popular pretzel croissant, while The Babcock features bacon ranch, arugula and tomato on a butter croissant.

Make your order a meal with a side and a drink for $4 more. Chips were the only side on opening day, but more (like potato, broccoli and pasta salads) will be coming soon.

Everything is homemade here, from Twila Mae's chicken salad to sweets.

You can always grab a container of chicken salad to go here too, just like legions of loyal customers have been doing at farmers markets for nearly seven years.

"And to our customers, thank you for turning a little family business into something we could have only imagined," Stevenson said.

Twila Mae's Chicken Salad, 18011 S. Tamiami Trail, Suite 30, Fort Myers; open 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. daily; (239) 523-5360; twilamaeschickensalad.com and on Facebook

Robyn George is a food and dining reporter for The News-Press. Connect at rhgeorge@fortmyer.gannett.com

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